

NIH Poster Day encourages postbacs to pursue careers in research

By Geoffrey Feld

NIEHS sent four postbaccalaureate (postbac) Intramural Research Training Award (IRTA) fellows to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Postbac Poster Day April 30 at the NIH campus in Bethesda, Maryland.

Three of the NIEHS fellows — Rebecca Evans, Collin Johnson, and Preeti Kodavanti — won outstanding poster awards at the event, and Lauren Donoghue, Evans and Kodavanti received travel awards from the NIH Office of Intramural Training and Education. All four expressed excitement about incorporating research into their career paths.

Gaining experience and recognition

NIH hosts over 600 postbacs at its institutes and centers (ICs) to expose recent graduates to careers in research. A major annual event, Postbac Poster Day offers fellows an opportunity to present their research, learn about science conducted at NIH, and network with colleagues for career development. While the vast majority of participants work on or near the main Bethesda campus, both NIH and the postbac mentors, known as preceptors, encourage postbacs at all ICs to participate.

Stravros Garantziotis, M.D., head of the NIEHS Matrix Biology Group and medical director of the **NIEHS Clinical Research Unit**, has hosted eight postbacs since he joined the institute in 2008. “I find it rewarding to mentor [postbacs] in this stage of their careers and go through the process with them,” he said.

This year he encouraged his two postbacs, Johnson and Kodavanti, to attend Poster Day. Both of them, together with Evans, scored in the top 20 percent of all presentations, earning them outstanding poster awards. A panel of graduate students, postdoctoral and clinical fellows, staff scientists, and clinicians served as judges for the event.

“The NIH postbac program is one of few opportunities for recent graduates to tackle full scientific projects and receive training,” said Donoghue. That may explain why undergraduate research advisors, including those of Donoghue, Evans, and Johnson, are so quick to recommend the program to motivated students. And, why graduate schools are “very pleased to see this training on my application,” Donoghue added.

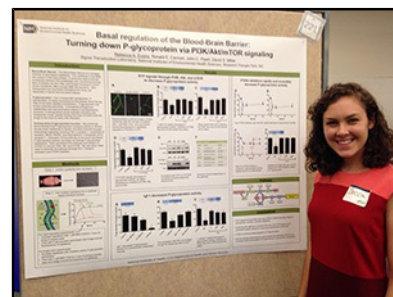
Presenting for the future

All four NIEHS postbacs reported that Poster Day was a valuable experience that helped solidify their interests in research. From networking with potential collaborators to communicating their science, the fellows felt they made the most of their travel.

“[The event] sparked my interest in pursuing clinical research during my medical career,” said Kodavanti, who starts medical school at Georgetown University this fall. Johnson added, “[Participating] helped direct my interests and intended career objectives towards exploring joint pulmonary-cardiovascular problems.”

Given that fellows at NIEHS are geographically separated from a variety of training resources, their strong showing is all the more remarkable. Recognizing this dilemma, Donoghue said that attending Poster Day was her way of taking advantage of these resources. “Many postbacs we met were not aware of NIEHS,” she noted, explaining that she felt the event provided an important opportunity for NIEHS postbacs to “be more active in their community and spread the word about the institute’s research mission.”

(Geoffrey Feld, Ph.D., is an Intramural Research Training Award fellow in the NIEHS Genome Stability Structural Biology Group.)



“I learned at the poster session that I really do enjoy talking about my work with other people and helping get them to a point of understanding,” Evans said. (Photo courtesy of Lauren Donoghue)

NIEHS presenters at NIH Postbac Poster Day

Lauren Donoghue (The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) — “A rodent-specific estrogen receptor beta isoform has tissue-specific expression and reduced transactivation with endocrine disrupting compounds”
Preceptor: Kenneth Korach, Ph.D.

Rebecca Evans (Davidson College) — “Basal regulation of the blood-brain barrier: turning down P-glycoprotein via PI3K/Akt/mTOR signaling”
Preceptor: David Miller, Ph.D.

Collin Johnson (The University of Texas at Austin) — “TLR5 modulates MyD88-dependent TLR4 signaling”
Preceptor: Stavros Garantziotis, M.D.

Preeti Kodavanti (The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) — “Mitochondrial protection accounts for decreased toxicity of nanoceria in macrophages compared to monocytes”
Preceptor: Stavros Garantziotis, M.D.



Postbac Poster Day participants, from left, Donoghue, Johnson, Evans, and Kodavanti, all spoke positively about the value of the experience. (Photo courtesy of Geoffrey Feld)

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